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When was the monist century?

 tif.ssrc.org/2017/10/03/when-was-the-monist-century/

Todd Weir Todd Weir is professor in History of Christianity and Modern Culture at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. Before coming to Groningen, he taught history for nine years at Queen's University Belfast. Todd Weir's research has focused on various aspects of the interaction of Christianity and secularism. He published a study on Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession in 2014 for Cambridge University Press. He has undertaken several collaborations and has a forthcoming book on secularism and socialism in the twentieth century. Todd Weir has an abiding interest in conversion and apologetics. His next major research project will be a transnational history of the term worldview/Weltanschauung from 1790 to the present.

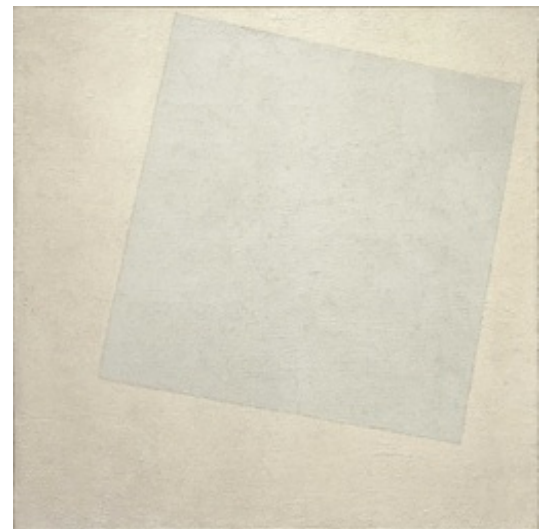
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Why study the immanentist tradition? One good reason is it can throw light on the quiet wave of naturalistic monism now coursing through the humanities. I am not referring here to interest in monism among academic philosophers. Rather I am referring to a broad trend, not always coherent, in which the longstanding habit of treating culture and nature as separate areas of inquiry is being undermined. Dualistic suppositions are being replaced by monistic ones.

A generation ago, post-structuralism stood strong against various forms of materialistic reductionism. When sociobiologists, such as E. O. Wilson, proposed to tackle human social structures and gender relations with the tools of natural science, they were largely rejected by humanities scholars. Today, by contrast, monistic approaches are creeping into and perhaps cracking open social and linguistic constructivism. There appears to be a new yearning to ground studies of culture in the body. This can be seen in the vogue for the study of affect and emotion, or in the growing interest in the Pleistocene, which extends beyond its status as the imagined source of the "caveman diet." Some [historians](#) want their discipline to link with that period, to go beyond the written and archaeological sources of the ancient civilizations and examine the brain itself as an evolving social product, where the "features of culture" have been "wired in human physiology."

There is no mistaking the heady, pioneering zeal that infuses the gatherings and writings of evolutionary psychologists today. Their confidence resides less in philosophical innovation than in the explanatory power of natural science. This connection to the cutting edge of scientific and technological discovery gives monism the character of the new. However, as I argued in [Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview](#), there was a past wave of naturalistic monism, which arose around 1840 and lasted into the mid-twentieth century. Today's monists appear largely unaware of this antecedent. My contribution to this forum compares these two movements of naturalistic monism. I want to pay particular attention to the way monists, then and now, embedded their philosophy in a complex of political, religious, and cultural conflicts. Precisely this embedding provides a novel entry point for considering the question posed by the hosts of this forum regarding the relationship of immanentism to the development of the immanent frame.

Although the term monism has early-modern origins, its popularization can be dated to 1866, when it was first invoked by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1837-1919), who argued that natural science had finally provided empirical verification of Baruch Spinoza's philosophical proposition that mind and matter, or thought and extension, were but two modes of a single substance. Darwinian evolution offered, in Haeckel's estimation,



a master theory linking the multiplicity of biological life to the development of human consciousness and civilization as a single meaningful totality. For Haeckel, the unity of matter and spirit in substance was mirrored by the unity of knowledge in natural science. With his bestselling manifesto *The Riddle of the Universe* in 1899, Haeckel propagated monism as the sole viable modern worldview.

In 1906 Haeckel formed an association to promote this worldview: the German Monist League. At its first international congress in 1912, the freshly elected president of this society, the physical chemist and Nobel laureate Wilhelm Ostwald, announced that he was opening a “monist century.” In the twentieth century, he believed that monism would become “the organizing principle of all practical cultural work” and lead to a revolution not only in natural science, but also in education, sexuality, land use, international relations, temperance, and the organization of work. Christianity was, in his mind, the greatest obstacle to the overcoming of dualism and Ostwald redoubled the efforts of the Monist League to remove the influence of the churches from public life.

The activities of the Monist League draw our attention to the importance of considering the cultural, religious, and political articulations of monism when trying to understand the particular allure of this philosophy. Initial comparisons with present-day monists reveal some striking continuities. First, naturalistic monism has generally not presented itself as a religiously neutral academic philosophy, but has courted conflict with monotheistic religions. While foregrounding scientific method, monists have consistently promoted various forms of immanence, from atheism to pantheism. This helps explain, I believe, why evolutionary psychologists today have made explaining the origins of religion one of their chief pursuits. Second, monists historically took and today often still take heterodox positions in the field of knowledge production. They engage in border disputes between natural science and philosophy over jurisdiction and method. Then as now, the popular scientific media have provided one of the chief arenas in which they have staked their claims. Third, monists have engaged academically and politically in questions related to the body, taking up causes as marginal as nudism and as significant as reform of gender roles and sexuality.

Alongside these parallels, there are significant divergences between the monism that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century and that which reappeared at its end. Whereas today its political expression is diffuse, between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century naturalistic monism provided an important epistemological foundation to actors in host of social and political movements. It was an undercurrent in the history of international socialism and had a formative influence on more than one generation of socialist leaders from August Bebel to Mao Zedong. By contrast, liberal monists, such as Haeckel, argued that history was driven forward by those races that had evolved more advanced cultures, making their monism an ideology of imperialism.

The connection between monism and political ideology was largely cut by the traumatic events of the mid-twentieth century. This caesura in the history of monism means that we are not living at the end of the “monist century” as understood by Ostwald. If there was a monist century, it began in the 1840s and ended in the 1940s and lived in ambitious projects of political, religious, and cultural reform and revolution of that era.

If I had to bring the difference between past and present monisms down to one essential point, I would say that the future options tied to monism have changed. On this last point, I want to open up my considerations to include the frame in which monism operated. Monists believed that their philosophy of immanence would lead to a restructuring of the entire cultural matrix. But how? The importance of asking this question was the point of the parable of the madman, which Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1882. Nietzsche’s madman shouted that the death of God had “unchained this earth from the sun,” a metaphor for the total transformation of humanity’s place in the world that Nietzsche believed atheism had triggered. For Nietzsche the comfortable atheists of his day lacked the imagination to realize the existential implications of this transformation, and had his madman dash his lantern to the ground. Smugly self-confident liberal monists belonged to this class of atheists; Nietzsche had earlier vented his spleen at the D. F. Strauss, who in 1872 had broken a lance for scientific monism in his bestselling work *The Old and New Faith: A Confession*. Rather than revaluing all values, Nietzsche worried that such atheists would merely move into and happily inhabit the hollowed-out shell of Christianity.

Nietzsche’s madman may have found the reform of a Haeckel or Ostwald too bland, but he certainly shared

more in common with them that he did with the monists of today. Past monism was Promethean. Its atheism sustained a utopian vision. By contrast, today's atheism is far less explosive. It holds less promise, less potential for future transformation. According to Charles Taylor, we have arrived at a situation, in which faith and doubt, theism and atheism, exist more or less comfortably in much of Europe and North America. Rather than the earth becoming unchained, it is the individual who has become "untethered."

This brings our comparison to its widest scope. What is the relationship between past and present monism and the development of the "immanent frame"? Taylor suggests that this frame has emerged from the ongoing dialectic of doubt and faith, which has produced a complicated force field of "cross pressures". He looks for most of his material in high culture. But, as we have seen with historic monism, this form of immanentism was tightly connected to its social and political matrix. Rather than only thinking of the immanent frame as something comprised of questions of faith and ideas, we might consider it as a cultural frame. The fact that there existed a "monist century" suggests that there were some common features of the cultural frame of the period from the 1840s to the 1940s that allowed this particular vision of the future to become widespread. Unlike Taylor's untethered individual, Nietzsche's unchained sun was articulated in a framework that expected a unified totality.

Whereas today's immanent frame allows for the options *both/and*, the nineteenth century generally expected *either/or* solutions. This either/or framework was undergirded by the structures of nineteenth-century religion and society. Between the 1840s and 1940s the state churches still held hegemonic positions in most European countries and citizen rights were often connected to religious affiliation. Even in secular states like the United States, there was a strong expectation that Christianity should form the basis for moral action and education. Historian Hugh McLeod has helpfully defined this as "late Christendom," a period that ended in the 1960s. In that frame, atheists could consider themselves *the* alternative to Christendom, whereas now they are just one alternative among many. This either/or framework extended also to political and ethnic identities. The monist century was a period in which rising nation states and nationalism, confessional politics, and strong antisemitism, corresponded to demands that identities be unitary and exclusive. Either/or politics was found in many socialist movements, which believed in the possibility of the total transformation of state and economy and the emergence of a "New Man."

In summary, historical monism helps us recognize that part of the attraction of monism for contemporary scholars resides precisely in its anticlerical barb, its tendency towards heterodoxy and its offer of a universal ground. At the same time, it is clear that Ostwald's dream of a "monist century" belongs to the past.